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ABSTRACT

In this large scale study, the extent of parent involvement in preschool day care and its impact on staff and on classroom environments in child-centered and adult-centered situations were assessed. Subjects were 15 directors, 30 teachers, 524 children in 30 classrooms. Interview schedules and a classroom observation scale were the two instruments used. The findings indicate that: (1) the percentage of parents who are board members is not a determinant of parent influence; (2) there is a relationship between the amount of parent involvement in administrative areas such as fiscal control, hiring and firing, and personnel practices, and the amount of influence in curriculum/teaching areas; (3) this influence is mediated primarily through the director; (4) the amount of parent involvement is related to whether classrooms will be child-centered or adult-centered; and (5) this relationship varies with the social class status and educational level of parent policymakers. (Author/ED)

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PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN DAY CARE: ITS IMPACT ON STAFF AND CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT*

The purpose of the study was to assess the extent of parent involvement in preschool day care and its impact on staff and on classroom environments, which were conceptualized as child-centered or adult-centered. A total of fifteen directors, thirty teachers, thirty classrooms and 524 children constituted the populations of the study. Interview schedules and a classroom observation scale were the two instruments used. The findings indicate (1) that proportions of parents who are board members is not a determinant of parent influence, (2) that there is a relationship between the amount of parent involvement in administrative areas such as fiscal control, hiring and firing, and personnel practices and the amount of influence in curriculum/teaching areas, (3) that this influence is mediated primarily through the director, and (4) that the amount of parent involvement is related to whether classrooms will be child-centered or adult-centered, and that this relationship varies with the social-class status and educational level of parent policymakers.

*N.B.: This article is based on a large-scale study of parent involvement.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN DAY CARE: ITS IMPACT ON STAFF AND CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS

With the advent of federal funding for research and development in preschool programs, particularly for the disadvantaged, an impressive data base has emerged highlighting the significance of the parent's role in the education of young children. Parent involvement is now mandatory for programs using federal funds.

The literature identifies two major areas of parent involvement--parent education and parent policymaking. The former--parent education--emphasizes the role of the parent as learner. The lower-class child's home is viewed by many theorists as providing an educationally deficient environment for child development. Numerous studies have found that lower-class mothers are more likely to use power-oriented techniques of control such as ridicule and punishment than middle-class parents. When teaching their children, lower-class mothers give less orientation to the task, use less specific and complex language, more negative reinforcement and more commands. These maternal strategies appear to be related to children's aggression, lower academic achievement and IQ, lower persistence, higher distractibility and a greater tendency to be externally motivated.

Educators subscribing to the educational deficit view, therefore see parents as needing specific training to improve their childrearing skills; as a result, many preschool programs have incorporated parent education components either as a primary focus or as an adjunct to children's programs.

Studies of such programs revealed that gains in IQ, achievement and language development were greater and longer-lasting where parent education was most intense and of the longest duration.

The second major aspect--parent policymaking--has developed from a line of thought which holds that social institutions do not recognize the strengths, values and traditions of the lower-class family and are unresponsive to the needs of the child and his community. From this point of view it follows that parents must play an important role in policymaking in preschool programs in order to make their children's education more relevant and meaningful. The limited number of studies of programs in which parents were active in decision-making have reported that parents developed a greater sense of personal effectiveness, increased self-esteem, and raised levels of aspiration, and that these gains had a spinoff benefit to children (Bromley, 1972; Lazar and Chapman, 1972).

Although recognized as both legitimate and important, the involvement of lower-class parents in decision-making roles continues to be problematic. When parents seek partnership with professionals, tensions are often prevalent. One difficulty relates to differences in child-rearing values between lower-

class parents and more middle-class oriented professionals. Although there is general agreement that goals for children are basically similar in these two groups (Chilman, 1968), many researchers have noted differences in emphases. Working and lower-class parents want their children to be obedient, neat, clean, and compliant with authority (Kohn, 1959) and in educational settings they dislike permissiveness and value formal academic skills (Ruderman, 1969). Middle class adults, on the other hand, want children to be considerate, curious, happy and inner-directed (Kohn, 1959) and are negative about lack of individual care, excessive structure and regimentation (Ruderman, 1968). This research suggests that middle-class adults--parents and teachers--are therefore likely to favor a more loosely structured, child-centered educational approach emphasizing social skills, creativity and informal teaching methods, whereas lower-class adults are more likely to favor an adult-centered, tightly structured approach with an emphasis on strict discipline and formal teaching of the three R's.

Other tensions arise around the question of the extent to which parents should share in decisions and policymaking. How much involvement is optimal? At what point does parental power pose a threat to program content and to professional autonomy? In an analysis of the effects of varying degrees parent and teacher power in different types of preschools, Handler (1971) reported that where parents are dominant with

respect to central policy questions such as fiscal control and hiring, firing, and personnel practices, many teachers find it difficult to preserve a modicum of professional autonomy, even though they are highly trained.

FOCUS OF THE STUDY

It seems clear that a number of basic issues remain unresolved in the area of parental involvement. Specifically, problems center around discrepancies between the values and attitudes of lower-class parents and many early childhood educators. Some of the parameters of these issues are pointed to in the previously cited research. Little or no research has been reported in the literature as to how parental policy-making has acutally affected operation and content of early childhood programs. The present study, focusing on daycare centers, assesses (1) the extent and nature of parental control and (2) the impact of such control on staff and on classroom environments. In this study, classroom environments are conceptualized as being child-centered or adult-centered.

METHOD

Population

Parent involvement was studied in fifteen municipally-run day care centers randomly selected from various parts of New York City. In each center two classrooms were systematically observed by two trained investigators (the project director and a graduate student in early childhood education). The center's director and the teacher of each of the observed classrooms were then interviewed. Thus, fifteen directors, thirty teachers, thirty classrooms and 524 children were studied in this project.

Instruments and Procedures

The two types of instruments used were (1) interview schedules for directors and teachers, to determine the extent of parent influence and (2) a classroom observation scale, to assess classroom environments.

1. Interview schedules: These were questionnaires including both closed and open-ended questions and requiring 45 to 60 minutes to administer. Two versions were used, one for directors and one for teachers.

The director questionnaire elicited information about the composition of the board, number of parents on the board, and extent of such members' participation and influence on on the board. The director of each center provided two scores to assess parental involvement and/or influence. The first

score involved identifying locus of control in the area of board vs. director. A high score was assigned if power was perceived as centered primarily in the board, a moderate score if power was shared between the board and the director, and a low score if locus of control was primarily in the director.

The second score involved parental involvement and/or influence on the board. Directors assigned a high, moderate or low score for parental involvement and/or influence. The two scores were combined, to produce overall center ratings of high, moderate, or low.

The teacher questionnaire was designed to yield data concerning the major source of decision-making in implementing the children's program. Teachers were asked to rate as high, moderate, or low the extent to which parents, the director or teaching team members influenced their teaching practices. In addition, teachers were asked a number of questions pertaining to their satisfaction with the amount of parent involvement in their centers, what happened if conflicts with parents arose, and what areas of involvement they felt were legitimate for parents.

2. Classroom Observation Scale: In each center two classrooms were observed during an entire morning from the time of the children's arrival to the beginning of the lunch period--a minimum of three and one half hours of observation per classroom. It was felt that the morning schedule would

yield the most information about the children's program since the afternoon was largely taken up by nap and outdoor activities, after which many children left for the day.

The Classroom Observation Scale consisted of six measures: three assessed teacher behavior, two related to individualization and one concerned the extent of didactic/academic emphasis. Interrater bias was controlled by observing classrooms on a split-half basis, with interrater agreement of 87%.

A. Teacher Behavior: Observers rated teachers on three polar dimensions on a scale of one to five as follows:

1. Authoritarian/Democratic. The authoritarian teacher imposes arbitrary rules without explanation; the democratic teacher makes situational rules and offers reasons.
2. Warmth/Rejection. The warm teacher smiles, is communicative, affectionate, nurturing; the rejecting teacher gives little or no affection, is non-nurturing and/or disparaging.
3. Permissive/Restrictive. The permissive teacher allows children much discretion and support; the restrictive teacher enforces strict and narrow limits and offers little support.

B. Individualization: This was a measure of the degree of self-selection and self-pacing of children. Two dimensions studied were (1) individualization of routines and transitions

and time spent by children in self-selected activities as compared to time spent in teacher-selected activities.

1. Routines and Transitions. Within the limits set by the physical environment of each classroom, observers rated the extent to which routines and transitions were regimented (whole group at once) or individualized (children pace themselves in a leisurely pattern). Regimented, abrupt routines and transitions were scored as adult-centered, and gradual, individualized routines and transitions were scored as child-centered.
2. Child Occupancy Time. Time spent in child or teacher-selected activities was assessed by a time-sampling technique during the work-play period. Every five minutes, observers made a visual sweep of the room and recorded aggregates of children in different activities. A Child Occupancy Time score for each classroom was arrived at by multiplying the mean number of aggregates by the total number of minutes of duration of the work/play period. These scores were then ranked an categorized as child-centered, moderately child-centered, or adult-centered. During a pilot phase a test of inter-observer agreement was run on the time-

sampling procedure during which the two observers recorded simultaneously but independently. Interobserver agreement was 95%.

C. Didactic/Academic Emphasis. During the time-sampling periods, observers determined whether children were engaged in activites which had a high didactic/academic emphasis (letter and numeral tracing, workbook exercises, etc.) or more open-ended activities such as painting, construction toys, dramatic play, water play, etc.). Observers also rated whole-class teacher-directed as high didactic/academic (calendar work, telling time, rote counting) or low didactic/academic (story-telling, singing, rhythms, etc.). A classroom was rated as child or adult-centered according to the amount of didactic/academic emphasis.

Scores on all six measures were summed and classrooms were classified as follows: Child-centered, Moderately child-centered, or Adult-centered.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following were some of the main findings of the study:

1. The number and proportion of parent board members is not by itself a reliable indicator of parent influence. For the centers with high percentages of parent board members

(60-100%), 50 percent of directors reported high parent influcence and the other 50 percent reported moderate to low parent influence. In centers with low to moderate percentages of parents on boards, 60 percent of the directors reported low to moderate influence and 40 percent reported high parent influence. One director whose board consisted of 100 percent parent members reported virtually no parent influence in any area of policymaking, while another director with no parent board members reported high parent influence in all areas. Thus, it appeared that in centers with 100 percent parent boards, center operations may be left entirely to staff, while centers with no parents on boards may, nevertheless, be heavily influenced by parents, indirectly through other community board members or by direct contact with directors and teaching staff.

The finding suggests that the critical element in determining the extent of parental control and influence is the degree of continuous and active participation in board activities, including program monitoring, by those parents who are board members. Directors who reported high parent influence in their centers perceived parent board members as highly active and vocal, as being politically effective, and as being able to influence other, non-parent board members. This finding supports Hoffman's conclusion that for parents to have influence:

> ...service on boards and policy committees is not enough. It must be effective service. This means that training is essential for all policy committees and that plans, staff, money, and continued attention must go into the effort. (Hoffman, 1971, p. 46.)

2. Parent influence is greater in the administrative area (fiscal control, hiring and firing, personnel practices,) than in the curriculum/teaching area (methods and content of the children's educational program.) In the fifteen centers studied, eight of the directors (53%) reported high parent influence, three reported moderate influence, and four reported low parent influence in the administrative area.

However, in the curriculum/teaching area, none of the directors reported high parent influence. Nine ((60%) reported moderate influence and six (40%) reported low parent influence.

There appeared to be a relationship between the extent of participation in one area with the other. With the exception of two centers, greater parent involvement in broad policy-making at the administrative level did appear to be associated with greater influence in the curriculum/teaching area. Of the eleven centers, reporting moderate to high participation in policymaking at the board level, nine (80%) reported moderate influence in curriculum/teaching matters. Table 1 summarizes these findings.

TABLE 1

CLASSIFICATION OF CENTERS BY PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN ADMINISTRATIVE AND CURRICULUM/TEACHING AREAS

Parent Involvement			
Administrative	Curriculum/ Teaching	Number of Centers	Percent of Total Centers
Low	Low	4	27%
Moderate	Moderate	3	20%
High	Moderate	6	40%
High	Low	2	13%

The High/Low configuration for two centers was a departure from the general pattern. Further study revealed that the two centers in this category were on college campuses, serving high proportions of parents who were college students or faculty members. Although physical proximity and flexible parent schedules permitted much opportunity for informal classroom visits and staff contacts, parental influence in the curriculum/teaching area remained low. This may have occurred because as teachers and aspiring professional themselves, these parents may have identified closely with the teacher's role and placed a higher value on professional autonomy.

3. The group of teachers as a whole viewed their professional decision-making not as a unilateral process but rather as shared with directors and other teaching staff, with the exception of five of the 30 teachers who claimed to have

total professional autonomy. Teachers ranked directors first, team members second, other classroom teachers third and parents and/or board members last in important as factors influencing their professional decision-making.

There was a considerable discrepancy between the perceptions of directors and teachers as to the impact of parents on decision making in the curriculum/teaching area. Although eight directors (53%) perceived moderate parental influence in this area, only 20% of the teachers shared this perception. Apparently, the impact of parently influence in professional decision-making is experienced most directly and powerfully by directors and more diffusely or not at all by teachers.

4. The extent of parent involvement appears to be related to whether classroom environments will be child-centered or adult-centered. With the exception of the two college campus day care centers (High/Low), the highest percentage of child-centered classrooms appeared in centers with the least amount of parent involvement in both areas (Low/Low). The situation is reversed in centers with the greatest amount of parent involvement in both areas (High/Moderate.) In the latter, the percentage of child-centered classrooms was lowest and the percentage of adult-centered classrooms was highest. The relationship between parent involvement and classroom environment is summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2

PARENT INVOLVEMENT BY TYPE OF CLASSROOM INVOLVEMENT

Parent Involvement (n=30 classrooms)	Child-Centered	Moderately Child-Centered	Adult-Centered
Low/Low (n=8)	50%	25%	25%
Moderate/Moderate (n=6)	17%	50%	33%
High/Moderate (n=12)	17%	25%	58%
High/Low (n=4)	75%	25%	0%

The highest proportion of child-centered classrooms appeared in the two campus day care centers (High/Low). This finding supports other research which indicates that more highly educated parents prefer more child-centered strategies and are, therefore, more likely to hire and support staff who will implement such strategies.

The findings suggest that in more typical day care centers serving lower-class populations, low parent involvement may result in staff's experiencing fewer professional constraints. Staff may then be more likely to adopt child-centered strategies. Conversely, where parents play a dominant role in policymaking, classrooms will tend to be adult-centered.

It appears that classroom environments vary in their degree of child or adult-centeredness according to the extent of parent involvement and also according to social-class status and educational level of parents.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of parent policymaking on day care center staff and on classroom environments. In brief, the major findings were that (1) the proportions of parents who are board members is not a determinant of parent influence, (2) that there is a relationship between the amount of parental control in administrative areas such as fiscal matters, hiring and firing, and personnel practices and the amount of influence in curriculum/teaching areas, (3) that this influence is seen as mediated primarily through directors, (4) that the amount of parent involvement relates to whether classrooms will be child-centered or adult-centered, and that this relationship varies with the social-class status and educational level of parent policymakers.

A large body of research has demonstrated that the teacher's behavior is the most significant variable in the classroom. The results of the present study indicate that teacher's curriculum and teaching strategies are formed within a highly complex matrix of general center policymaking which is reflective of the attitudes and values of the parents and the

community served. The actual extent of the influence on teachers of each of the component parts of the decision-making network--community, boards, parents, directors, and other staff members needs more explicit study.

Whether child-centered or adult-centered environments are "good" or "bad" must ultimately be decided when there is greater societal consensus on superordinate goals of child-rearing. Ours is a society that values diversity and cultural pluralism, as well as parent involvement, and these values are currently reflected in diverse strategies of program implementation in preschool settings. However, as Fein (1973) has pointed out, social-class differences in many child-rearing goals are disappearing. Perhaps, when greater consensus is reached, an alternative between extremes of child-centeredness and adult-centeredness will emerge. Highly "authoritarian" methods of discipline can give way to firm, but mild "authoritative" methods of control. Formal, rote instruction in the three R's can yield to more informal methods, emphasizing play, while at the same time not neglecting academic skills.

In the absence of such consensus however, what is to be done? In his cross-cultural analysis of parental goals, LeVine (1974) wrote that when resources for subsistence are relatively scarce or precarious, parents will have as their overriding concern the child's capacity for future economic self-maintenance. Parental behavior will then be directed to vital and conspicuous short-term goals, while overlooking the

less visible impact on the long-term psychological development of the child. Lower-class parents do appear to be focused on short-term goals such as academic skills which are more conspicuously tied to economic success. Yet at the same time such long-term goals as autonomy, curiosity, and inner-directedness are bypassed, despite the fact that these characteristics may be even more important to middle-class existence and success.

Highly adult-centered classrooms do appear to neglect the less visible impact on the long-term psychological development of the child. Several such classrooms observed in this project were impoverished, if not stultifying environments for young children. We must guard against the danger that day care will itself become an educationally depriving environment needing amelioration in the future.

Parent involvement represents both promise and threat. It may be that ultimately the antidote to potential educational danger is more intensive and extensive parent education which is still minimal in most day care programs. Only then will the promise of effective parent decision-making be realized. Until then, as Data notes, day care programs must "place the child at the center of decision-making, not self-actualization, or equal rights for their parents..." (Data, 1972, p. 9).

The End

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